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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationships between social desirability (the tendency to seek socially and culturally approved behaviors) and argumentativeness, communication apprehension, and communication competence. Using R. Strahan and K. C. Gerbasi's Social Desirability Scales, from a pool of 259 undergraduate students, 70 students were identified as high social desirability individuals and 96 as low social desirability individuals. Both groups completed three instruments measuring argumentativeness, communication competence, and communication apprehension. Results indicated that the high social desirability individuals tend to be more apprehensive, more competent, and less argumentative in the process of communication. (One table of data is included; 45 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Social Desirability as a Predictor of Argumentativeness, Communication Apprehension, and Communication Competence

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Abstract

The study investigated the relationships between social desirability and argumentativeness, communication apprehension, and communication competence. Using Strahan and Gerbasi's Social Desirability Scales, from a pool of 259 undergraduate students, 70 students were identified as high social desirability individuals and 98 were low social desirability individuals. The high and low social desirability individuals were used for the purpose of this study. The results indicate that high social desirability individuals tend to be more apprehensive, more competent and less argumentative in the process of communication. Limitations and directions for future research were discussed as well.

Social Desirability as a Predictor of Argumentativeness, Communication Apprehension, and Communication Competence

Scholars from different disciplines have focused much attention on the topic of social desirability which is "the tendency for subjects to respond to personality test items in a manner that consistently presents the self in a favorable light" (Holden & Fekken, 1989, p. 181). The study of social desirability has been approached in two different ways (Sohlberg, 1976). On the one hand, the expression of social desirability is considered an interfering variable that should be controlled in the study (e.g., Cronbach, 1946; Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Edwards, 1957; Seibold, 1988). This approach argues that social desirability is an individuals' tendency to respond consistently in what they see as "a socially acceptable and desirable way" (Sohlberg, 1976, p. 301), and this tendency always causes bias in personality assessment. Therefore, social desirability should be controlled in the study.

One the other hand, social desirability, instead of being treated as an interfering variable, is seen as "an indicator of a characteristic reaction pattern of an individual in certain situation" (Sohlberg, 1976, p. 302). In other words, social desirability reflects a personal trait which becomes a meaningful personality variable and, in turn, will correlate with different kinds of human behaviors (Block, 1965; Crandall & Gozali, 1969; Cronbach, 1970; Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Crandell, Crandell, & Tatkovsky, 1965; Dicken, 1963).

Communication researchers have made contributions on the research treating social desirability as an interfering variable, especially in the study of compliance-gaining strategies (e.g., Boster, 1988; Burleson & Wilson, 1988; Burleson et al., 1988; Hunter, 1988; Seibold, 1988). Surprisingly, no study has treated social desirability as a personality variable in the communication discipline. In order to bridge this gap this study attempted to investigate the effect of social desirability on communication variables.

As a personality variable, social desirability is considered an individual's tendency to seek the socially and culturally acceptable and approved behaviors. Crowne and Marlowe (1964) have conducted a series of studies concerning the motive of individuals in seeking social approval. These findings indicate that people who score high on the social desirability scale tend to be more cautious, conventional, and persuasive than those who score low.

In order to investigate the antecedents of social desirability tendency, Allaman, Joyce, and Crandall (1972) conducted two longitudinal studies using two groups of children and young adults as subjects. The results of the studies show that significant relationships exist between social desirability and imitation, conformity to parents, negative self-perception, and poorer intellectual functioning. In other words, high-scoring children and young adults are likely to be more rigid or less competent in communication. Similar studies by Crandell (1966), and Crandell and Gozali (1969) indicate as well that a stringent religious

training along with timid behavior cause a high degree of social desirability.

Cultural factors are other antecedents of social desirability mentioned by scholars. For example, Crandell, Crandell, and Katkovsky (1965) reported a significant relationship between social desirability and ethnicity. Their study shows that black subjects attain higher scores on the social desirability scale than do white subjects.

Sohlberg's cross-cultural study (1976) on the comparison of the social desirability responses between Jewish, Arab, and American children indicates that Arab subjects score significantly higher social desirability levels than do Jewish subjects. Furthermore, the social desirability level for both Jewish and Arab subjects is significantly higher than do American subjects. According to Sohlberg, the differences of the three groups of subjects are related to basic characteristics between cultural and psychological backgrounds. For instance, Arab society is more likely to show "rigid forms of politeness and conformity, which are closely related to obedience to one's parents and old members of the family," and, therefore, the high social desirability level of Arab subjects can be explained as "reflecting the cultural climate of traditional Arab society with its ideals of developing the social graces and reinforcing values like loyalty, politeness, and good manners" (p. 309-310).

Except for the motives and antecedents of social desirability, one might ask: How does social desirability affects individual's

behavior? Many studies have tried to answer this question. For example, Crandell, Crandell, and Katkovsky (1965) found that significantly negative relationships exist between social desirability and the quality of language, task performance, independent achievement, and verbal and physical aggression. In other words, individuals with a higher degree of social desirability are less proficient in using language, show a low degree of task productivity, tend to be more dependent on others for completing assignments, and are less aggressive verbally and physically in their interaction with others.

Studies from Allison and Hunt (1959) show that high social desirability individuals express significantly less aggression, especially in situations where the intention of the frustrating source was not specified. Similar results were also reported by Fishman (1965). Moreover, Crowne and Marlowe (1964) studied social desirability and persuasibility and found that in a public delivery situation, high social desirability subjects tend to change their attitudes in the direction they were asked to advocate. This tendency is characterized by low self-esteem, as expressed in feelings of social inadequacy, depression, and aggression inhibition (Hovland & Janis, 1959).

Nevertheless, although Crandell, Crandell, and Katkovsky (1965) indicated that high social desirability individuals showed less ability on task performance, Brown (1960) reported a contradictory finding. Brown found that high social desirability females show a more confident attitude when involved in a learning task, better

ability with immediate recall of information, and overall superiority over low social desirability females.

Finally, Crandell's (1966) study shows that high social desirability children demonstrate several characteristics including a low degree of participation, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, concern for other's evaluation, and a tendency to be being inhibited, controlled, and conventional. The study further indicates that girls with high social desirability are less verbally and physically aggressive, and avoide social interaction.

In summary, the research indicates that high social desirability individuals are less aggressive, less willing to talk, avoid social interaction, lack self-esteem, and are more persuasible and constrained. No consistent findings support that high social desirability individuals tend to show high degree of task ability. These research findings are very likely related to three communication variables: argumentativeness, communication apprehension, and communication competence. It is then the purpose if this study to examine the impact of social desirability on the three communication variables.

Expected Relationships Between SD and Variables

Argumentativeness, communication apprehension, and communication competence are three of the most common variables studied by communication scholars. Argumentativeness is considered by Infante (1981) a stable trait which "predisposes the individual in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues and to attack verbally the positions which

other people take on these issues" (p. 72). Research has indicated that high and low argumentative individuals differ in several communication behaviors. When communicating, high argumentatives are more verbose, more dynamic, and less argumentative than are low argumentatives (Infante, 1981; Infante & Rancer, 1982). These research findings lead to a hypothesis which shows the relationship between argumentativeness and social desirability:

H1: High social desirability individuals will show less degree of argumentativeness than do the low social desirability individuals.

Communication apprehension is conceptually defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 87). Intensive studies of communication apprehension have been applied to different communication situations, including the professional lives of chiropractors and pharmacists, students, and cross-cultural interactions (e.g., Allen, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984; Berger, Baldwin, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1983; Daly & Stafford, 1984; Fayer, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1984; Kloph, 1984; McCroskey & Beatty, 1984; McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985; McCroskey, Burroughs, Daun, & Richmond, 1990; Watson, Monroe, & Atterstrom, 1984, 1989). Results from these studies indicate that communication apprehension plays a negative role in the process of interaction. Individuals with high communication apprehension are consistently

found to show less willingness to communicate. In other words, high apprehensive individuals tend to avoid and withdraw from communication.

Because high social desirability individuals are found to avoid communication, a hypothesis is advanced to show the relationship between social desirability and communication apprehension:

H2: Individuals with high social desirability are more apprehensive with communication than are individuals with low social desirability.

Communication competence is the interactant's ability to execute communication behaviors to elicit a desired response in a specific environment (Chen, 1990). Communication competence includes both cognitive and behavioral processes which is referenced by appropriateness and effectiveness (Wisemann & Backlund, 1980; Spitzberg, 1983). A competent person has been found to be more willing to communicate (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986), to show more verbal and nonverbal support, more relaxed, more flexible, more empathic, and more involved in an interaction (Cegala, 1981; Rubin, 1982; Wheeless & Duran, 1982; Wiemann, 1977).

Since the study of social desirability has shown that high social desirability individuals tend to avoid interaction, the relationship between communication competence and social desirability might be predicted. However, owing to no consistent findings of social desirability on the individual's ability to get the task done, it is difficult to predict the direction of the

relationship between social desirability and communication competence. A research question is therefore proposed:

RQ: Is there a difference between high social desirability and low social desirability individuals regarding communication competence?

Participants

Participants in the study were 168 undergraduates enrolled in basic communication courses at an eastern university. Among these participants, 59 of them were male, and 109 were female. The average age was 19.27. Participants were selected on the basis of their Social Desirability Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) scores that had been gathered from a total of 259 undergraduate students. Seventy students with high Social Desirability Scale score and 98 students with low Social Desirability Scale score were chosen for participation in this study.

Measurement

The participants' degree of social desirability was measured by Strahan and Gerbasi's (1972) Social Desirability Scale. The scale is comprised of ten items, and each item contains a True/False answer. Those participants who scored correctly seven or more items were considered high social desirability persons, and those who scored correctly less than four items were considered low social desirability persons.

Both high and low social desirability groups were asked to complete three instruments of argumentiveness, communication competence and communication apprehension. The Argumentiveness

Scale developed by Infante and Rancer (1982) was used to measure participants' tendency of argumentiveness.

Cupach and Spitzberg's (1981) Self-Rated Competence Scale was used to measure the participants' perception on how competent they are in a social interaction. and McCroskey's (1982) PRCA-24 was used to measure the degree of communication apprehension of participants. The coefficient alphas for the three instruments in this study were .90 for the Argumentiveness Scale. .86 for the Self-Rated Competence Scale. and .94 for the PRCA-24.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the high social desirability individuals will score lower on argumentativeness scale than do the low social desirability individuals. T-test was computed to examine this hypothesis. The results are summarized in Table 1. The results indicate that the hypothesis is supported (see Table The results show that the high social desirability individuals (M = 3.16. SD = 0.59) scored significantly lower than did the low social desirability individuals (M = 3.38. SD = 0.60). $t = -2.27$. $p < .05$.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the high social desirability individuals will score higher on the communication apprehension scale than do the low social desirability individuals. The results confirm the hypothesis (see Table 1). The high social

desirability individuals (M = 3.39, SD = 0.63) scored significantly higher than did the low social desirability individuals (M = 3.18, SD = .60), t = 2.29, p < .05.

The research question examined the differences between high social desirability and low social desirability individuals in the scores of communication competence. The results demonstrate that the high social desirability individuals (M = 3.92, SD = 0.35) score significantly higher than do the low social desirability individuals (M = 3.72, SD = 0.34), t = 3.78, p < .001 (see Table 1).

Discussion

While there is an abundance of research related to social desirability, few investigations have treated social desirability as a personality trait. The current study, treating social desirability as a personality trait rather than an interfering variable, attempted to examine the impact of social desirability on three communication variables: argumentativeness, communication apprehension, and communication competence.

It was predicted that, as a personality trait, social desirability will significantly influence these communication variables. As the results indicate, individuals scoring high in social desirability scales show more apprehension and are less argumentative in communication. In addition, individuals scoring high in social desirability scales perceived themselves being more competence in communication.

Since social desirability is an individual tendency to act

consistently in a socially acceptable and desirable way, it is not surprising to find out that high social desirability individuals are more apprehensive and less argumentative. In other words, a high social desirability subject would act according to the social norms. The concern of violating the social norms probably accounts for the apprehension of high social desirability individuals. Argumentativeness is considered to be close to the concept of verbal aggression which is discouraged in most societies. Trying to confine oneself to the social requirements may be the reason why high social desirability individuals showed less argumentiveness in the communication process.

Finally, the results concerning the relationship between social desirability and communication competence are provocative. If previous studies have shown that high social desirability individuals tend to avoid interacting with others, then why do they perceive they are communicatively competent? If individuals perceive conforming to social norms or expressing socially desirable responses to others as an element of being competent in interaction, then how about judging competence from the third-party perspective? Will a third party also consider them competent? It will be interesting for future research to investigate this problem.

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TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, t Values and Probabilities

	High SD	Low SD	t Test
Item	MN/SD	MN/SD	t Value/Prob.
Argumentativeness	3.16/0.59	3.38/0.60	-2.27/0.05
Apprehension	3.39/0.63	3.18/0.60	2.29/0.05
Competence	3.92/0.35	3.72/0.34	3.78/0.01

Note. N = 168. Significant p < .05.